NEWS

It’s all in a day’s work for WinCAM’s director David Gauthier

PETER CASEY | STAFF WRITER

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WinCAM Executive Director David Gauthier shows the control room at the Swanton Street headquarters. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

The sign of a good manager is to lead by example, and not ask yo
do something you wouldn’t do yourself. That’s why you’ll find Da

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Gauthier shoveling snow in front of the Swanton Street headquarters of Winchester's community media center known as WinCAM.

"There are certain days where I have to bring two, three different sets of clothes, depending upon what I've got," the long time WinCAM executive director said. "I could be running up to the State House to testify. I could be back here two hours later underneath a console ripping out wires or taping down cables. Or I could be shoveling snow out front. You never know."

WinCAM's executive director, David Gauthier, shows the access station's various awards. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

Gauthier's background in community media originated almost accidentally when he volunteered his time in his hometown of Salem after graduating from Salem State College.

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"I took a sports broadcasting course and that was the first time I ever visited a public access station. They had opened one in my home city of Salem," he said. "This was around 1995 and I started going in and just started volunteering my time and that turned into my first job in community media."

Being executive director at WinCAM is a job that provides Gauthier with enough of a day-to-day challenge.

"I like the fact that this field has a lot of variety to it," he said. "I'm not doing the same thing every day, that's for certain. I like to be moving, I like to be challenged. I think there's still value to what we do, regardless of what our detractors might say.

"There is a certain amount of people out there that say this [community media organization] is an antiquated notion," he continued. "That this... there's no place for this anymore....this is old-style type of technology."

Why do you need community media?

Community media organizations originated before the internet at the dawn of communities creating a wired infrastructure for cable television. With that infrastructure and the explosion of cable television came the birth of community media stations.

Gauthier explained Massachusetts is one of the states with the highest number of community media organizations in the country.

"It's federal law that states that if a cable company comes into your town...that uses the public rights of way to sell their product they are obligated to give back," he said. "Massachusetts by the way [has] the highest concentration of media centers in the country, by far. Th more than 200 community outlets in Massachusetts. The only states with

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more than 100 are Texas and California, states with four or five times the population of Massachusetts.”

David Gauthier, WinCAM's executive director, works in the station's podcast studio. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

It's arguably an important aspect of providing transparency in government. But with changing technology and business practices, media organizations, including community media, are facing challenges in terms of funding and technology. It’s well documented that news deserts are popping up all over and the amount of local news coverage across the country is shrinking.

Winchester, Gauthier said, is not immune to the effects of shrinking news coverage.

“I do say that this is sort of the last bastion of true free speech,” h
“People would say well, ‘community media isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be

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because I can use my phone and I can go live to a global audience in seconds. Why would I go to the access center where I'm just, ya know, on local channels.'"

"Well, it depends," he continued. "It depends on what your goal is. If you're looking for hyper local content, this is the only place where it exists anymore really. A lot of the newspapers, local newspapers, have dried up. If you want to know what's going on in your town, where else do you go?"

Proving WinCAM's worth is part of the job for Gauthier. He's heard from residents that it doesn't matter to them what happens at a School Committee meeting or the Planning Board and that they don't care about public access stations and certainly don't want to pay for it.

"I think it's the kind of thing where until you need it you take it for granted," he said. "I didn't care much about school committee meetings until I had kids. Now, I have more of a vested interest. Or maybe I didn't care about high school sports until my daughter's out there on that soccer field and I want to be able to see it because I'm working...and I can't get there at four o'clock in the afternoon. Your priorities change and it becomes more important to you. So, if it's not there when you do need it then where do you turn; it doesn't exist."

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WinCAM Executive Director David Gauthier said community access is important to communities, which is why it's important to keep it going. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

Gauthier learned about the importance of that local coverage early on as a new executive director in 2011.

“I can remember one of the first meetings I had in the town of Winchester was with the former chair of the Select Board, Forest Fontanna, and he sat me down in that chamber and said we have had nothing but trouble with our meeting coverage and all of that and you’re going to fix that. Right?” he recalled. “And I said yes, I am sir.”

At that time most of the work provided by WinCAM had been done with volunteers, which forced Gauthier to pivot and professionalize the operation.

“One of the first things I did was I took the volunteer aspect out o
said listen this is going to have to be staffed produced stuff. It’s gotta be

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professional. It's gotta be priority number one," he said. "This is the number one thing that people are looking for that we provide. Yeah, it's great to have member produced shows and those kinds of things. We love that. I could do that all day. But it's the government meetings that quote, unquote, pay the bills."

Since the professionalization of the WinCAM staff, Gauthier said the number of hours dedicated to government meetings has gone through the roof. But it comes with a cost.

The cost of operating WinCAM

Paying the bills is an ongoing struggle for community media. As with many news media organizations, the primary costs at WinCAM are personnel, rent, insurance and utilities. Contracts with Verizon and Comcast do provide some funding for capital improvements and equipment.

WinCAM is not lacking in equipment and while it's not as big of an operation some communities have, such as NewTV in Newton, WinCAM just installed new edit suites with new computers and the Swanton Street studios appear to be well equipped.

"We're not lacking in equipment," Gauthier said. "Are the camcorders the most update ones? No. They're probably six or seven years old. But they're not bad. Studio A could use a little, Studio B could definitely need a little attention.

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David Gauthier takes a break in the WinCAM kitchen. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

“I’ve been working on capital planning just because that is shrinking all the time,” he continued. “But operationally is where we’re sort of hamstrung. I’d love to be able to have more staff to expand the programs. You have that sort of chicken and egg deal where if you had more time and had more people you could do more things you could be out in the community a little bit more, and you could bring in more people and that would sort of feed the whole thing and keep everything going strong.”

The downside for community media organizations being primarily funded by cable company contributions is that the practice of consumer cord cutting is also cutting off a source of revenue. Many cable subscribers have opted to reduce their cable bills by switching to streaming services and then only relying on the cable providers, or others, to provide internet service.

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Massachusetts has seen cable subscriptions at a statewide high in 2016 drop 30% by 2022. In Winchester, the drop was almost a 32% decrease in cable subscribers, according to numbers available on the state's Department of Telecommunications and Cable website.

The multi-purpose room at WinCAM. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

Streaming services are not taxed nor do they provide any community media funding that cable companies do. When a cable customer drops all services except internet access, they do not have to pay the local access fee.

By federal law, the internet is not taxed.

Gauthier said that has serious impact on funding.

"It's huge," he said. "Cable subscriptions continue to go down, 25 statewide, as more people move away from traditional cable. That's how

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public access is funded."

The local fee is only on cable TV services.

That doesn't mean Winchester saw almost one third of its funding disappear.

"It's not one to one," Gauthier said. "Cable prices go up. So, they're still making money and we're getting a percentage of what they're making. But our funding is definitely going down year on year. No doubt."

In one sense, it appears a solution could be on the horizon, but it requires legislation. That always takes time. There are federal and state organizations fighting on Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill for changes in legislation to create more funding.

Gauthier currently serves as president of MassAccess, a statewide organization representing community media organizations.

"We are trying to get streaming companies such as Netflix, or Amazon Prime, or Hulu to pay that same 5% for the use of public rights of way," he said. "We see it as the same exact infrastructure, the data is different. How does your Netflix get into your house? Well, it runs through the wires that are connected to the telephone poles, over public land. It runs into the exact same wire that your cable television used to come through and it appears on your television. There's no difference. They should be subject to the same exact fees."

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The WinCAM control room. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

According to Variety, many of the streaming services have banded together to form a lobbying group representing their interests in Washington. The Streaming Innovation Alliance formed in the fall of 2023 and its membership includes some of the major players in the streaming business. The streaming services industry has largely escaped regulation in recent years.

It is Gauthier's hope that a change in legislation can first happen here in Massachusetts. Winchester resident and state Sen. Jason Lewis is one of the sponsors of a bill in the Massachusetts Senate that calls for funding help for community media. There is also a version of the bill in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Gauthier said the Massachusetts legislation could make a differen nationwide.

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"We're really trying to make a push because if we can make a precedent here in Massachusetts that's going to be big because we are a big player on the national scene," he said. "It's always been that way. Massachusetts has a very strong, strong contingent so if we can make a difference here... you've got a real chance here to make a big difference across the country."

Beneficial experience

Through its Swanton Street headquarters, WinCAM is trying to provide a beneficial experience for Winchester residents. Longtime residents may recall the building previously housed a diner and a grocery store. Now, in addition to WinCAM, it is also a satellite gallery for the Griffin Museum of Photography.

Displayed in the multipurpose room, you will find photographs from various artists also on display at "The Griffin." WinCAM will see people stop by just to see the photo exhibits. Along with the photos, WinCAM will usually get an interview in studio with the artist, which creates more local programming. Gauthier sees it as a win-win for the WinCAM and The Griffin.

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Inside WinCAM's studio. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/PETER CASEY

With just two full-time employees (including Gauthier) and two part-time employees, WinCAM provides workshops and free training for WinCAM members. Memberships are open to any Winchester resident or person working in Winchester. There is also a sports broadcasting class at Winchester Recreation taught by WinCAM staffers.

Gauthier said it’s all part of the mission.

“Community media is part of the fabric of life in Massachusetts,” he said. “Whether you know it or not, you’ve probably used it in one form or another over the course of your last 15 years of your life. It’s worth protecting.

“In a world where costs are just skyrocketing, this is something th basically free to you, and a resource for you,” he continued. “Wh you want to protect that?”

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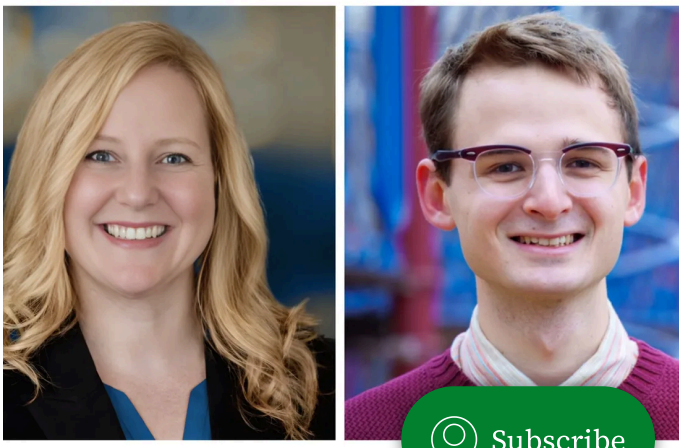

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FEATURES

'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

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The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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